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THE DERTINGER CASE AND THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE GDR

[The following article by Ernst Richert appeared in the June 1953 issue of Ost-Europa, a bimonthly West German periodical, published in Stuttgart by the German Society for Information on Eastern Europe.

In describing the circumstances and conflicts leading to the arrest of Georg Dertinger, former Minister of Foreign Affairs in the GDR (German Democratic Republic), in January 1953, the article sheds light on the actual functions and operations of the Foreign Ministry of the GDR as well as on Dertinger's methods and his true position in the Foreign Ministry.]

The fact that a foreign ministry was set up immediately upon the establishment of the Soviet Zone of Germany as the GDR, whereas the German Federal Republic had to do without one at first, in no way means that the GDR ever enjoyed a higher degree of independence in foreign policy matters. On the contrary, in the nearly 4 years of its existence, the GDR Foreign Ministry (or, as it is officially known, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the GDR) was unable to perform a single independent act. Of the few measures relevant to foreign policy, most, such as the agreement with Poland and Czechoslovakia, served first and foremost to give sanction to the existing political realities, such as the recognition of boundaries. The sensational proposal of September 1951 to reunify Germany, which introduced the new phase in the all-German problem, was the only foreign policy action of the GDR government which appeared to be self-initiated; this, however, did not originate with the Foreign Ministry but with Minister President Grotewohl.

The actual function of the Foreign Ministry, therefore, definitely has not been the development of an independent foreign policy for the GDR even within the limits set by the SCC (Soviet Control Commission) /abolished 28 May 1953, when Semenov was appointed High Commissioner in the GDR/. Instead, the Foreign Ministry has two functions, which can be outlined roughly as follows:

First, the function of the Foreign Ministry of the GDR parallels that of the Ministry of All-German Affairs in the German Federal Republic.

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Second, the Foreign Ministry functions as an information center on West European -- particularly West German -- conditions, for the rest of the Eastern Bloc countries.

The Dertinger Case can be explained on the basis of this double function of the ministry. In contrast to the practices of all other "People's Democracies," a member of the bourgeoisie -- a non-Communist -- nominally directed the "foreign policy" of the GDR for almost four years.

Despite contradictory reports in the daily press, Georg Dertinger obviously enjoyed the full confidence of the Kremlin during the greater part of his tenure in office. He probably gained the favor of the Kremlin during the so-called Kaiser Crisis of the East German CDU (Christian Democratic Union) at the end of 1947. At that time, Dertinger was Secretary-General of the CDU in the GDR; he informed Tulpanov, then the director of SMA (Soviet Military Administration) policy and the political adviser to the Soviet Supreme Commander, of the East-West contacts of the CDU leaders not following the Soviet line.

Dertinger was originally a journalist of the bourgeois rightist element, particularly of the "Stahlhelm" (German Association of Ex-Servicemen); and, to some extent, he also knew how to keep in step with the Nazi Regime. It was probably ambition and the desire for prestige which, after the break of Kaiser and Lemmer with the East German CDU, placed Dertinger in a position he was unable to cope with. Apparently Dertinger, as a result of his compromising political past, was more firmly in the clutches of the Soviet rulers than was agreeable to him. Thus, despite the fact that in the autumn of 1950 he was the official spokesman for the foreign ministers of the Eastern Bloc at the Prague Conference, Dertinger has never been the true foreign-policy department head, even though he did edit and, on the basis of his own knowledge, revise the biased, extreme reports of his assistants for Western countries.

Contrary to the prevailing opinion, this definitely does not mean that Ackermann, Dertinger's deputy and the Communist State Secretary, exercised any greater power in the department than Dertinger. In order to clear up these relationships, it is necessary to study the organization of the GDR Foreign Ministry itself.

Reports from the West

The Foreign Ministry is divided into three main departments ("USSR and People's Democracies, Capitalist Countries, and Basic Policy Matters") and a number of independent departments, such as the Personnel Policy (Cadre) Department and the important Press, Information, and Consular departments.

With the exception of the Basic Policy Matters Department (dealing with matters of constitutional and international law), which was headed for a long time by a party colleague of Dertinger's, the top-level positions in all departments have been occupied almost exclusively by Communists, and the key functions in the Main Department for the USSR and People's Democracies were reserved predominantly for Communist emigrants from Moscow. The most authoritative position is occupied by the son of the late Florin (fnu), a former KGD (Communist Party of Germany) Politburo member who died as an emigre in Moscow.

The relationships in the Main Department for Capitalist Countries looked different (notice how the organizational structure of the ministry conforms completely to the rigid dualistic concept of Communism). This department was headed for the longest time by Prentzel (fnu), SED (Socialist Unity Party) member. Without Dertinger's knowledge, Prentzel suddenly turned up in the employ of the ministry, presumably because, as Oberbürgermeister (Lord Mayor) of Goerlitz on the Neisse River, he had distinguished himself in connection with the East-German-Polish "agreement." Those wielding the actual power in the department, however,

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are Dr Raphael (fnu), an economist; and a man of the working class named Kohrt (fnu), who is said to be intelligent and energetic. Kohrt, a product of Communist Party schooling, appears to have the task of procuring those reports on West Germany which are made available (in cooperation with the Press Department) to the embassies in the GDR of the People's Democracies, so that the latter can "paint a picture" of the happenings in capitalist countries, particularly in the German Federal Republic. This picture, which Raphael supplements by special economic data, is derived chiefly from such sources as the West German KP (Communist Party) press and some neutral or pro-Soviet journals, as, for example, the Aachener Nachrichten, the Muernerberger Nachrichten, and the Fuldaer Volkszeitung; and also from the French KP newspaper L'Humanite and the bourgeois Le Monde. Furthermore, it can be assumed with certainty that the Main Department for Capitalist Countries maintains additional contact, via the SED West Commission, with the West German correspondents for the GDR news agency ADN (General German News Agency), who are under the leadership of W. K. Gerst; and with the West German correspondents for the GDR radio, the central offices of the KPD, and the various fellow-traveler and front organizations, such as the Society for German-Soviet Friendship.

The selection of this material was completely biased, and the information was frequently fabricated for the sake of fulfilling the news quota (as, for example, the report on the effect of the "Stockholm Peace Appeal"). The material was supplemented further by the somewhat more reliable compilations and reports of the German Institute for Contemporary History in East Berlin. All this information was reworked to conform with the black-and-white concept of Western decay versus Eastern ascent; the material then constituted the essence of the data on West German conditions available to the Soviet and other Eastern Bloc governments. On the basis of such misleading reports concerning the "revolutionary situation" in West Germany, the Eastern diplomats continually reproach the SED and the KPD for not being active enough in the German Federal Republic. Insofar as Dertinger checked the reports himself, he apparently criticized and revised these black-and-white descriptions. It is quite certain that he was not blamed for this. In the summer of 1952, when some of his closest coworkers fled because they had been assigned to spy on the minister himself, Dertinger complained of this attempted surveillance to State Security Minister Zeisser (deposed on 24 July 1953) and to Semenov, political adviser to the SCC. At that time, Semenov said that Molotov had authorized him to state that Dertinger still enjoyed the complete confidence of the Soviet government.

Of course, the possibility exists of a two-faced game on the part of the true rulers and their security organs. Nevertheless, everything points to the fact that even at that time, Dertinger was still completely in the good graces of the Kremlin. Of considerable importance is the fact that as late as 1952, on two official occasions, Dertinger, as the chosen representative of the GDR government, announced government declarations. One may assume that such a shrewd man as Semenov knew exactly how to differentiate between mere propaganda material and factual analyses, and that the more prudent delineation of West German conditions by Dertinger was not interpreted as "sabotage" by Semenov and his Moscow superiors.

Likewise, it is probably true that for a long time Dertinger enjoyed the favor of a number of leading personalities in the GDR, especially Pieck and also Grotewohl.

Bourgeois Contacts

What was the position of a man who was the nominal head of such a ministry? Why was Dertinger allowed to continue in his position for such a long time? In fact, why--in contrast to the practice in all other Eastern Bloc countries--was he appointed to such a position in the first place?

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The ideas which present themselves are, at first glance, somewhat startling. If the Foreign Ministry has had no important functions at all (with one exception to be discussed later), but has acted merely as a supplier of information on the West German situation to the Eastern Bloc countries and has functioned solely within the framework of Moscow's all-German policy, the obvious conclusion would be that both tasks would have been performed far better under Communist direction.

However, the exact opposite was the case. The policy of the National Front needed a man like Dertinger for window dressing. Not the Foreign Minister Dertinger but the strategist Dertinger of the SED-accommodating CDU wing or the SED-dominated Secretariat-General was of use. Dertinger, as the man who knew how to wear a monocle, as the man of cultured manners, and as the first of a group of CDU politicians who had personal contacts with West German politicians, was of considerable value to Semenov and his people.

The West Germany work, undertaken by the National Front under GDR-Communist direction, was carried out by the East CDU and the SED (the LDP [Liberal Democratic Party] and NDP [National Democratic Party] played a minor role) amidst constant, intense rivalry and with extremely ineffective coordination. In the opinion of the SCC and also of the Grotewohl wing of the SED, this work succeeded far better with the use of Dertinger's methods than with the crypto-Communist policies. Even after Dertinger's downfall, Franz Dahlen, (the SED director of this policy (who, in the meantime, has also been deposed) is said to have stated that it was ridiculous for the same few dozen KP functionaries, first camouflaged in one organization, then in another, repeatedly to feign adherence to the "non-partisan peace policy" in the German Federal Republic.

Here, in the subtle cognizance of certain bourgeois political circles in the German Federal Republic, Dertinger had his real sphere of operations. Even when Karlshorst and Pankow were absolutely resigned to the idea that the German Contractual Agreement and the EVG (European Defense Community) would be ratified, Dertinger, in the interests of his employer, refused to give up. By means of precise analyses of the internal West German disputes over the EVG and the German Contractual Agreement, he attempted to identify those West German politicians (particularly pro-Administration Bundestag delegates) who, if personally contracted, could possibly still be influenced at least to abstain from voting.

In this case, Dertinger probably fell victim to his own methods, which were so successful on other occasions. These methods involved utilizing, by means of personal contacts (not by stirring up mass demonstrations), channels of West German politics and the moods of sections of the West German bourgeoisie for the goals of the Eastern Bloc. However, Dertinger, as the de facto representative chief propagandist of the National Front (for this was precisely his actual function, hidden behind the facade of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), no longer had any choice. In any case, he must have sensed that he was in a whirlpool from which he could not escape under his own power. He had foreseen for some time and perhaps had even desired the fiasco of the National Front's Germany policy; he was unable to carry out a counterplan of his own.

Despite this, it was, to all appearances, the remains of his realism which finally brought about his downfall. Dertinger, who was thoroughly prepared to betray the interests of his party and its remaining activities (chiefly the control of church affairs) to the SED, saw himself completely isolated in the ministry after the arrest of von Mutius, his personal assistant, in the spring of 1950, and after the desertion of a number of his other party colleagues. Furthermore, Dertinger's relationship with Ackermann, his SED State Secretary, who was suffering from a stomach disorder and was otherwise not too active, had become noticeably strained after the initial display of cordiality. Yet, Dertinger made the mistake of saying "no" at one point; namely, with regard to the chances for compulsory military service in the GDR.

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Controversy with Ulbricht

With respect to the defense policy, Dertinger definitely advocated an active anti-Western stand. Like the SED Politburo, he spoke up for a closer GDR-Czechoslovakia-Poland alliance; likewise, he took a stand for the organization of the Nationale Streitkraefte (National Armed Forces). Above all, he directed the preliminary analyses (which were made by the Main Department for Capitalist Countries, under Prentzel, Kohrt, and Raphael, and by the Basic Policy Matters Department) for a separate peace treaty between the GDR and the USSR, and he made it a point not to make decisions without the backing of Ackermann and Florin. In every case of any importance, he sought the approval of Semenov. But according to reliable sources, Dertinger risked a sharp controversy with Ulbricht on whether the situation was then ripe for the development of the National Armed Forces on the basis of compulsory military service.

It is readily conceivable that from this day on the ZK (Central Committee) of the SED endeavored to have Dertinger deposed. How long the SCC or the Minister President could keep him in office had to be demonstrated. Dertinger himself probably was confident that he would be retained.

Who took the initiative to arrest Dertinger in January 1953 is still unknown today. Although, according to initial speculation, the GSD (State Security Service) was generally considered responsible, the later version was that the MGB (Ministry of State Security) had Dertinger arrested.

Both the official and the internal statements of the SED designated Dertinger as an agent of the West, who had worked for the British secret service through Plewe (fmu), a former CDU jurist and a contact man living in West Berlin. Persons closer to Dertinger consider his active participation in such activities improbable at the very least. Although it could have been a camouflage measure, during recent years Dertinger had increasingly isolated himself from his former West Berlin friends. Yet he was the last GDR minister to have children enrolled in West Berlin schools. It is possible, of course, that the ZK invented the story that Dertinger was an agent for the West order to deprive him of SCC support. In any case, it is quite certain that three of his closest coworkers and personal confidants, including his female secretary who handled his private and party mail, also were arrested. Other statements which appeared in the press, such as reports of the arrest of Florin, director of the Main Department for the USSR and People's Democracies, the arrest of Keilson, head of the USSR Department, and the flight of Count Thun, chief of the Protocol Division, are false.

Worthy of note is the reaction of the ZK of the SED, which did not establish its own foreign policy department until after the Dertinger episode in January 1953. Florin was put in charge of this department. That there was no such department prior to this time was not unnatural, because foreign policy in the GDR does not constitute a coherent sphere of operations but a relatively obscure, limited group of partial functions within the Soviet over-all strategy. On the other hand, within its scope of operations, the GDR Foreign Ministry was and is an important clearinghouse for many operations. The fact that the SED is now building up its own agency for these functions (with exactly the same degree of dependence on the SCC as before) by no means relieves the Communist government of the necessity of utilizing a considerable number of bourgeois personnel for its operations even in the future. It is not surprising that even now, Ackermann (deposed in early August 1953) does not have full authority. In fact, he must share the task of directing the SED's West operations with others; he must take into consideration the foreign policy work of Florin in the ZK; and, as before, he is only the provisional head of the ministry. All the diplomatic posts have been staffed with Communists, most of whom are Moscow emigrants or new SED recruits who were rapidly trained at the Walter Ulbricht Administrative Academy; both the East and West Main Departments have been left completely in Communist hands, and the remainder

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of the very different and somewhat divergent bourgeois personnel has been rooted out almost without exception. However, the question remains open as to whether or not, during the next phase, a man from the bourgeois element will again be placed at the head of the ministry as a figurehead. It will remain open until those directing the Eastern Bloc foreign policy see clearly which course their world and European policies are to take and how they are to react to the expected integration of Western Europe.

One will have to guard against considering the Dertinger case as confirmation of the oversimplified theory that, in the phase which is now beginning (since the second SED Party Conference), the "bourgeois slaves" have done their duty and that, henceforth, the course is clear for the final Sovietization of the government structure. The determining factors are far more complex; they cannot be simply explained by the statement -- which holds true in general -- that the Soviets control the state apparatus through the ZK of the SED. On the contrary, in individual cases, different tactical considerations play a determining part. Thus, the elimination or resignation of the bourgeois followers in the key positions is a question which is to be answered according to the pertinent situation, and which depends on the advantage to be gained for the Eastern Bloc and on the limits of personal flexibility.

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